

CBS Nightwatch

CBS Network

December 9, 1986 3:00 a.m.

Admiral Stansfield Turner

STAT

MR. FRED GRAHAM: Will the Iran/Contra scandal cost CIA Director William Casey his job? Already there have been bipartisan calls for his ouster on Capitol Hill. Did Casey have more to do with this secret operation than he's letting on? Perhaps lawmakers will get some answers when the CIA chief testifies Wednesday before the Senate Intelligence Committee in closed session.

This morning we look at this situation from the perspective of former CIA Director Stansfield Turner, who is also a CBS News consultant.

Do you think there's a danger to the CIA and to the intelligence community by virtue of a backlash that could grow out of this?

STAT ☐ ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: Yes, I'm very worried about the future of the CIA under these circumstances. One, it's reputation may go down again, morale may drop again as it did in '75 under the Church Committee investigations.

Two, I worry that the Congress may overreact and shackle the CIA because the Administration has not been

keeping the Congress well informed about what the CIA is doing.

MR. GRAHAM: Well, now you wrote an article that I read about two weeks ago in which you said that part of the blame is Congress' by requiring such reporting by the CIA of clandestine operations that some of them simply could not be carried out because they'd be afraid of a leak and people's lives were at stake. Explain that.

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, I'm not sure I --

MR. GRAHAM: Didn't you say something like that?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Not quite, Fred.

MR. GRAHAM: All right.

ADMIRAL TURNER: But let me explain what my position is, and that is that there are some instances in which the President should be allowed to postpone notification of the Congress. And I cited three examples when we, in the Carter Administration, did postpone. In all of them human life was very much at risk. I think it would have been irresponsible to have told more people on Capitol Hill what we were doing than we told inside the CIA.

MR. GRAHAM: Well, couldn't that be narrowed down? The law requires telling too many people now. What if it got down to telling two people?

ADMIRAL TURNER: The law does permit you to tell as few as eight. That law was not in effect when the Carter Administration had its exceptions that I mentioned. So it's very difficult today, in fact, to argue that you should not notify at least those eight. It has to be a pretty dicey situation, and there are some. So I think that loophole should still be preserved and urge the Congress not to close it totally.

But the President in this instance, I think, used poor judgment in exercising that loophole for this case.

There wasn't that much at risk here. There wasn't that much human life at risk, in particular.

MR. GRAHAM: And do you suspect that maybe he didn't tell them because it was a policy that they would disapprove?

ADMIRAL TURNER: It's been a -- well, that's partly it, but it's been a policy of the Reagan Administration since 1981 not to take the Congress into their confidence.

MR. GRAHAM: All right. Now, that this investigation has started do you think that we're asking the right questions about the role of the intelligence community?

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, I think overall we're going to focus on two questions that are not the right questions. First, who knew what and secondly, who gave what approval under these circumstances.

There are legal issues. There are possible charges of criminality, so those questions of exactly who was doing what and who knew what are going to be very prominent.

But the real questions we should be asking are who should have known what? Shouldn't some of these people like Shultz and Casey and Weinberger, Meese, Regan have been asking more questions? Shouldn't they have setup systems within their own departments that insured they would know these things?

And secondly, how could North and Poindexter and McFarlane, military officers operating in the White House, not have assumed that the President was behind what they were doing, perhaps, on their own? It doesn't seem to me --

MR. GRAHAM: Now, wait a minute. How could they not have assumed?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I probably put it wrong.

MR. GRAHAM: Yes. What most people are saying, here you have three military people, they are not used to going off on major flings like this on their own. And people are saying -- Tip O'Neill said, "The President should have known."

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I say how could they not have assumed, after the President had condoned their skirting the law in getting aid to the Contras through private sources, through other countries and so forth, clearly against the intent of the Congress, clearly an attitude of the end justifies the means. "We're really going to get one for the Gipper here."

So it's conceivable to me that North went ahead and diverted the profits from sales to Iran to the Contras in the knowledge that the President would be delighted even though he didn't bother to tell the President.

MR. GRAHAM: Now, is there a folk lore here among intelligence operatives that this deniability -- the President really knows but you've never confronted him with it in a way that you could nail him with it and you go down the tubes, you take the rap if anyone ever finds out?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I think that idea of plausible deniability is gone and I don't think you're going to find even these military officers taking the rap by going to jail if they didn't make the mistake themselves. I think that day's past.

MR. GRAHAM: You're suggesting we may have three John Deans here. If they appear to be taking the rap, you think that they will talk about the dealings they had with others higher up?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, it's hard to judge what an individual will do when he's under that pressure. But I would not be at all surprised if they're faced with the idea of going to jail, they simply make a clean breast of it, which is what they should do. Nobody should be holding out here.

MR. GRAHAM: Now, I don't think -- I can't remember an instance in which the Director of the CIA, current director, was being talked about in terms of perhaps being confronted with criminal charges. Am I right and what's happened here that this is suddenly the posture that the Director of the CIA's in?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, we don't have all the facts at this point. It does appear that either at a lower level, or perhaps at Mr. Casey's level, there was approval for a CIA action in November, 1985 for which there wasn't proper authorization. Therefore, it may have been illegal. Now, we don't know, you and I, whether that approval was down at the working level. Maybe Colonel North talked them into.

MR. GRAHAM: By the way, would that be a criminal violation? Is there a statute that says that's a crime to do that?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes. Yes. You're a more legal minded person than I, Fred, but there is a law that says you will notify the Congress in a timely manner of all covert activities. Anything that isn't collecting intelligence is a covert activity. Helping the Israelis deliver that arms shipment in November 1985 was a covert activity for which there was no Presidential approval and no notification of the Congress.

MR. GRAHAM: But I do think that there's no criminal sanction to that statute. Now, there may be other criminal violations involved in dealing with arms and money and such.

Let's take a break and come back and talk about other aspects of this.

We'll be right back with Stansfield Turner.

(Commercial)

MR. GRAHAM: We're talking with Stansfield Turner who, of course, was formerly a Director of the CIA.

You know, one of the things that's surprising about these allegations is that there seems to be uncertainty at the CIA, or they claim that there is uncertainty, about how much they knew and how much they authorized. Does the CIA run that way that there's after the fact uncertainty as to who did what?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I certainly hope not. The CIA people, when I was there and not due to me, due to their own training, I thought kept very good track of these things, particularly the flow of money.

There were so many problems raised by the Church Committee in 1975/76 that they were leaning over backwards to be sure they were both complying with the law and being able to prove what they had done so they could prove they had complied with the law.

MR. GRAHAM: So if the CIA is following the same institutional procedures that you found when you got there, there's no reason why these committees on the Hill could not be given accurate records to show just who knew about what?

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's true with this one exception. So much of this whole operation took place, what they call, "off line."

Now, the story in the morning newspaper today that the Counter-Terrorism Committee, organized as a result of Vice President Bush's task force on terrorism, wasn't in the loop for all this, didn't know about all these activities.

So you don't know whether some of these actions were taken by one or two people and with deliberate exclusion of the rest of the system.

MR. GRAHAM: Now, we've been told a couple of things. There was a CIA fund and that, perhaps, money was commingled; CIA money with Saudi money and with the money that they got from the sale of the weapons. Do you know from your own knowledge as to whether the CIA operates in that fashion?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I think it would be very unusual to operate that way, but this is a very unusual situation. At the same, let's be cautious. We just don't have many facts to go on.

MR. GRAHAM: Okay. One other thing that's been reported and not confirmed is that the CIA agreed to help with an air shipment of what turned out to be weapons from Israel to Iran. But the CIA was told by Lieutenant Colonel North, according to this story, that it was oil drilling equipment. Would the CIA take the word of even someone who works in the NSA for that and not check it out?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I certainly hope not. But I get the impression all around town today that the NSC under the Reagan Administration has had great power, more than one would expect. Largely, it seems to me, because Cabinet officers have been unwilling to argue with the NSC people, which meant going back to the President and arguing it.

We have a President who isn't familiar with the details of a lot of these operations and so the Cabinet officers probably were in a difficult position to say to McFarlane or Poindexter, or whomever, "We want to go to the President and argue this one out," because the President hadn't all the background on it.

MR. GRAHAM: Okay. Now based on what you've read, what is your sense of, in a general sense, what went wrong?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I think it was too great a determination to accomplish this Contra action down in Nicaragua. It has become an obsession with the Administration and they came to this point, I mentioned earlier, that the end justified the means and, therefore skirting the law, not being willing to keep the Congress advised on this, has taken them into such an interring of secrecy that there wasn't good advice either from the Congress or from within the system itself. The experts were not included in this and,

apparently, a very few people made the decision that an opening to the moderates in Iran was feasible,

whereas, there doesn't seem, in retrospect, to be any evidence that there was anything but a con game going on here.

MR. GRAHAM: There were hints over the last year that somebody in the Reagan Administration, and a few of them had even put the finger on Lieutenant Colonel North, was orchestrating all of this aid to the Contras in apparent violation of the law. Now, nothing was done about that over all that period of time except Senator Kerry did try to investigate that. Now, do you have any sense of why that wasn't stamped out right there?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes. I think the Congress and, to some extent, the media and, to a smaller extent, the public are responsible for what's happened here because in August, 1985 there was a great many press stories about Colonel North's freewheeling activities skirting law in getting aid to the Contras. Very little was done about it.

Senator Kerry, yes, in September/October, 1986 is gearing up an investigation. But what happened between August of '85 and now? Not very much on Capitol Hill? Why? Because the Congress had an election coming up, President Reagan was a terribly popular President, and nobody wanted --

MR. GRAHAM: And everybody was winking at the fact that the President was apparently circumventing the will of Congress?

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's right. The Congress knew they were being thwarted and they would not stand up to it because of the President's popularity.

MR. GRAHAM: Admiral Turner, one more sort of technical question before I ask you a final question.



We were told by Attorney General Meese that the first word of this came through intercepts. Apparently NSA got these intercepts and realized that this thing was going on with the Contras. Why didn't those intercepts flow right up to Shultz and Weinberger and all the others?

ADMIRAL TURNER: We just don't know the details of this. You see, sometimes intercepts are not recognized until after the fact. We don't --

MR. GRAHAM: You don't know what they're talking about?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, we don't have the manpower to read everything that's intercepted.

MR. GRAHAM: Oh, I see.

ADMIRAL TURNER: So if isn't cued in by a code word that goes through the computer, the message may not be seen by a human being.

MR. GRAHAM: I see.

ADMIRAL TURNER: But now when you have some facts to go on you can go back and extract all those messages that might have pertained to arms to Iran, for instance.

MR. GRAHAM: Well, you and I have just run out of time. I wanted to ask you what you thought might be the final outcome with regard to the health and fate of the CIA. I'm going to hope that we'll get you back and deal with that at a future broadcast.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Thank you.

MR. GRAHAM: Thank you very much, Stansfield Turner.